

## This Chicago Team Went from Last to Nearly First in 17 Games

If you're looking for a bright spot in Chicago sports, head to tomorrow's Fire game.

By John Wilkinson

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At least one Chicago team's fans have something to cheer about. Photo: Nuccio DiNuzzo/*Chicago Tribune*

"Rebuilding." It's a word that strikes fear in many a Chicago sports fan—those who remember the futility of the early-2010s Cubs, or the, uh, right-now [Bears](#), [Bulls](#), and [White Sox](#). While the Cubs have emerged victorious on the other side, the rebuilding process can be an unending cycle: hope, lose, repeat.

Meanwhile in Bridgeview, the Chicago Fire is making a compelling case that its rebuilding is complete. After finishing the past two seasons dead last and not making the playoffs since 2012, they've gone from worst to nearly first in the span of 17 games. After last Saturday's 4-0 win at Toyota Park, the Fire are in second place, just one point off the best record in MLS. Just halfway through this season, they have already won more games and earned more points than they did in either of the past two seasons.

"We have a lot of guys [now] that weren't here and just really don't care about last year or five years ago. It's totally out of our minds," midfielder Dax McCarty [said after Saturday's match](#). "We have a lot of winners here ... who are hungry for more wins and more success."

So, how did they do it?

### New Management

The seeds of the turnaround were planted on September 20, 2015. Sitting in last place in the Eastern Conference, nine points out of MLS's generous playoff qualification with five matches left in the season, the club announced some [big personnel moves](#): the firing of head coach and director of soccer Frank Yallop and the hiring of Nelson Rodriguez as general manager.

Rodriguez came to the Fire as a veteran executive with U.S. Soccer and MLS. He soon tapped Veljko Paunovic as the club's new head coach. Paunovic, who speaks six languages and had a long playing career across a number of countries, was fresh off leading his native Serbia to the 2015 FIFA U-20 World Cup championship. His role with the Fire was his first senior professional coaching post.

Rodriguez sized up the club in his first offseason, and found "a great deal of pride and a genuine desire" to succeed and do so with the Fire, he says. But he also felt there was a "stale quality" to team morale. "I think that losing has a way of slumping people's shoulders and driving people down," he says. "Not that they liked losing, but it didn't hurt as much as it hurts me, as it hurts Pauno, as it hurts our fans. I felt that that was something we needed to change."

The 2016 season brought lots of roster turnover and some signs of improvement—a first road win in more than two years and a run to the Open Cup quarterfinals—but ultimately the Fire once again finished in last place.

Still, Rodriguez says his faith in the process never wavered: “I felt that the best progress we made last year was becoming a team that learned how to compete, but the incompleteness was in translating that into learning how to win.”

## New Blood

The 2016-17 offseason, then, was when the Fire took their big swing.

The team added MLS veterans Dax McCarty and Vitor Gomes Pereira Jr. (better known as Juninho)—both tireless workers and trophy winners—in the midfield. Up front they added Hungarian striker Nemanja Nikolic, the reigning Player of the Year and top scorer in Poland’s top league.

“From the outside looking in, it looks like losing almost became accepted and a culture of losing with this club almost became the norm,” McCarty said the week he joined the team. “I’m not the type of player that is going to be OK with being average and having another losing season, and I guess that’s part of the reason why they’re bringing me in.”

On March 21, three games into the season, news broke that the Fire were signing another veteran midfielder, German star Bastian Schweinsteiger. It was a move that some called risky, as the 32-year-old World Cup winner had struggled to stay healthy and earn playing time at previous club Manchester United, but the Fire saw him as the final piece of their puzzle.

## A Breakout Season

McCarty, Juninho, and Schweinsteiger have provided the veteran spine the club was hoping for, but Nikolic has turned out to be the breakout star of the group. Despite winning a league title, being named Player of the Year, and leading the Polish league in goals at his previous stop, he wasn’t exactly a ticket-selling household name, even in your local soccer bar.

But now, Nikolic has proved his credentials—tallying 14 goals and two assists in 17 games to lead the league in scoring.

“Everybody knows that the last year was not so good for Chicago,” Nikolic says. “I think that the most important thing was now the players believe that we can win every game against every opponent that we play.”

The Hungarian’s emergence has also brought the best out of teammate David Accam. The speedy Ghanaian forward was the team’s MVP and top scorer over the dismal past two seasons, but with 10 goals and six assists in 14 games, Accam is already having his best season yet.

## A New Attitude

With that, the Fire have transformed from doormats to contenders. The club is undefeated at home this season, having won seven straight at Toyota Park—the second-best home winning streak in club history—heading into Saturday’s match against Vancouver Whitecaps FC. As Paunovic [put it after a May 13 home win](#) over the defending champion Seattle Sounders, “The team is growing. The smiles are back in Bridgeview finally.”

And with Nikolic and Accam playing so well, it’s basically a shoo-in that the Fire will have at least one All Star selection, if not two or three, when Soldier Field hosts the All-Star Game in August. The club has only had one All Star since 2013.

While the rest of Chicago’s sports fans wait for “rebuilding” to complete, (or for a contending team to start acting like one), Chicago Fire fans have something to be optimistic about, even if the high-flying team is trying to keep its feet on the ground.

“We want to appreciate everyone who had patience for us and support, especially from our owner and ownership and the front office and our fans, that was very important,” Paunovic says.

“But I also want to say something about where we are now: we are not there. We haven’t won anything yet, we still have room to improve,” he adds. “The season is long and I just want everyone to keep on the ground—because maybe last year we were underground—but now when we’re on the ground, [and] we have to stay there because we still have a long season to play.”